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Reed Screens of Central Asia

John L. Sommer

Reed Screens are basic furnishings of the traditional Central Asian nomad's round, felt-covered tent that, in English, we call a *yurt*. Traditionally, Central Asian pastoral nomads migrated seasonally with all household items, family and flocks. Useless items had no place. A pretty thing had to be a useful thing.

Reed screens are made of tall grass stems, wrapped with dyed but unspun wool fibers and bound together. The art of the decorated reed screen found its highest level among the Kyrgyz and Kazak nomads of Central Asia. Nearly unknown here in the west, such reed screens often show the great skill of their master makers. The patterns and motifs resemble those of nomad rugs, felts and of flatwoven kilims, for which these reed screen designs may well be ancient precursors.

In this presentation, John Sommer will tell how he first became acquainted with reed screens, of his visits to Central Asia and of his acquaintance with Professor Klavdiya Antipina, "the mother of Kyrgyz Ethnography." He will describe the traditional Kyrgyz yurt, its construction, its furnishings and something of its symbolism. He will show actual Kyrgyz Reed Screens and slides of 19th and 20th century reed screens, of archival photographs of reed screens in use and of analogous reed screens from other ethnic groups elsewhere in the world.

He will demonstrate the basic principles of the structure and the construction of the reed screen, using a simple apparatus which can be thought of as a kind of early warp-weighted loom.

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